



Elections 2006

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Voters across Texas are currently taking advantage of our early balloting procedures and making their preferences known for those who will serve in federal, state and local offices.

If recent trends are any indication, fewer than half of all eligible voters will cast a ballot by the time polls close on election day, November 7. This is disturbing. The United States has been the world's leader in promoting democracy around the world, and we shouldn't take it for granted here at home.

Though it hasn't been widely noted, we've made steady progress in recent decades to help extend human rights and democracy to millions of people worldwide.

Freedom House, a non-profit, non-partisan organization working to promote democracy and economic freedom, does an annual survey of political conditions around the globe, evaluating countries based on their open political competition, respect for civil liberties, and independence of their news media among other factors. In 1972, only 42 countries – accounting for less than a quarter of the world's population – were rated as “free.”

But by last year, that number increased significantly, with 89 countries advancing to the “free” category, representing 46 percent of the world's 6.5 billion people. The entire Western Hemisphere (except for Cuba) has moved to “free” or “partly free” during that time, thanks in large part to U.S. leadership.

Unfortunately, there remain large segments of the globe, including Russia, China and the entire Arab world, that remain in the third Freedom House category: “not free.”

The United States has a vested interest in promoting democracy. When human rights are respected, including equality for women and minorities, the discontent that breeds terrorism is removed. History teaches that democratic governments are far less aggressive toward their neighbors – and the peace freedom promotes is of value not only regionally, but also to the entire global community.

Although some critics claim that democracy is not possible in certain cultures, the fact is that all people yearn to be free. And all human beings yearn to escape from the yoke of repression.

We've seen this most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq, where millions of people braved extremist threats to life and limb in order to cast ballots as real democracy was introduced for the first time.

We all remember the televised images of Afghans and Iraqis proudly displaying purple fingers after voting for the first time. Last year in Iraq, 58 percent of eligible voters cast votes in their first election. That was followed by a national referendum with 63-percent turnout, and then a parliamentary election with 77-percent turnout – all with the threat of violence and physical retaliation not far in the background. It is clear that these people appreciate the ability to make their voices heard, and that they understand the importance of participating in elections.

We in the United States are privileged to live in the greatest democracy in the history of mankind (or, “that the world has ever known”...either way.). Americans do not have to worry about the same threats faced by the Iraqi or Afghan people as we head to the polls. For most, the question of whether to vote is merely a matter of interest or convenience.

Our blessings are often more noticeable to outsiders. In October, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, visited Midland. He spoke to a large crowd in his native language, and praised the U.S. devotion to democracy, and the uplifting freedoms inherent in our system. His remarks were a potent reminder to us all of the freedoms we enjoy.

I urge Texans to help keep our democracy strong this month by participating once again in our electoral process. Secretary of State Roger Williams, and our state lawmakers, have made voting – both early, and on election day – as easy as possible for citizens across the state.

We have made extraordinary efforts as a nation to extend the benefits of democracy and open government to people around the world. It's up to each of us to stay informed, and to contribute to the strength of our democracy here at home.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.

For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column